



Studies in Literature and Language
Vol. 4, No. 1, 2012, pp. 129-134
DOI:10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.2009

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Savagery and the Heart of Darkness in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi^{1,*}

¹ College of Education, Aden University, Yemen

* Corresponding author.

Received 20 December 2011; accepted 14 September 2011

Abstract

William Golding's first-hand experience of battle-line action during World War II "was to shock him into questioning the horror of war. These experiences inform his writing; he was appalled at what human beings can do to one another, in terms of the wartime atrocities...and in their being innately evil" (Foster,7)

Two important elements of Golding's life and experience are powerfully reflected in *Lord of the Flies* – his pessimism after the Second World War and his insight- as a schoolmaster into the way children behave and function; these two elements from the focus of examination in this paper.

What happens when boys are left to their own devices? Golding implies a radical less optimistic view of human nature and civilization. More explicitly, he uses a Pacific island to symbolize the condition of humanity. "Having clinically insulated life on the island from the world and thus contrived a microcosm, he magnifies and inspect it. By this method he examines the problems of how to maintain moderate liberal values and to pursue distant ends against pressure from extremists and against the lower instincts." (spark notes.com)

Keywords: Tropical island; Children; Beast; Heart of darkness; Savagery

Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi (2012). Savagery and the Heart of Darkness in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 4(1), 129-134. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120401.2009> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.2009>

THEMATIC CONCERN

Historically, the post-war period was one of hope and optimism, but the events which Golding had witnessed did not allow him to see things so simplistically. "The war alone was not what appalled him, but what he had learnt of the natural - and original-sinfulness of mankind did. It was the evil seen daily as commonplace and repeated by events it was possible to read in any newspaper which, he asserted, were the matter of *Lord of the Flies*. The war could be regarded as the catalyst which released an already present evil. People possessed this trait in a fundamental and permanent fashion - it could emerge at any time and under any condition" (Foster,10)

It was not just adults who had the capacity for brutality, such as that seen in German labour camps or in Japanese prisons; Golding isolates young children on the island in *Lord of the Flies* and makes us see them acting with just as much barbarism as is revealed in the adult world. "In essence, they are innocent, but nevertheless budding adults – and so potentially evil and sadistic. Children, it is said, can be cruel and in this novel we see stark examples of their cruelty" (sparknotes.com).

The novel starts with a group of boys - aged between five and twelve - the sole survivors of an air crash which takes place during their evacuation from England. Having landed on a fictitious tropical island, the boys are left to govern themselves; for all the adults have been killed. At first they delight in their freedom and in their pleasure of the island. They elect as their leader a boy called Ralph, and under his guidance they agree to keep a fire burning as a signal, to summon assemblies by blowing a conch, and to allow a hearing to any boy holding the conch.

Ralph and Piggy, a fat intelligent boy with asthma,

arrange to build shelters, leaving foraging to a slightly older boy, Jack Merridew. As leader of choirboys who were among the castaways, he was envious of Ralph's election; to pacify him Ralph suggested that the choir, led by Jack, should undertake to hunt the wild pigs living in the forests. Jack welcomes this and says that they will also watch the fire and keep a lookout.

Ironically enough, choir boys who are supposed to be more light-hearted and spiritual, followers of the church, choose to play hunters which is an obvious sign of the contradictions of their personalities. When Piggy suggests that they make a list of names - he has already made a start - but Jack ridicules his list as being

Kids' name," said Merridew. "Why should I be Jack? I'm Merridew."

Ralph turned to him quickly. This was the voice of one who knew his own mind.

"Shut up, Fatty."

"Then," went on Piggy, "that boy- I forget- ".....

Laughter arose.

"He's not Fatty," cried Ralph, "his real name's Piggy!"

"Oh, Piggy!"

A storm of laughter arose even the tiniest child joined in.

For the moment the boys were a closed circuit of sympathy with Piggy outside: he went very pink, bowed his head and cleaned his glasses again. (LOF, pp.28-29)

Before the boys leave, Piggy expresses his disapproval with Ralph about telling the group his name, and Ralph apologizes and gives Piggy the task of taking the boy's names.

Jack smears his face with some clay and goes with his choir to hunt. He needs that facial camouflage, and explains that he believes the pigs see him rather than smell his odor. The degeneration of the boys' way of life is also very evident through the symbolic masks. When concealed by masks of clay paint, the hunters, especially Ralph, seem to have new personalities as they forget the taboos of society that once restrained them from giving in to their natural urges. For example, when Jack first paints his face to his satisfaction, he suddenly becomes a new, savage person. "He began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling. He capered toward Bill, and the mask was a thing of its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness" (LOF, p.64). The hunters fail in their first attempt to catch a wild pig, but their leader, Jack, becomes increasingly preoccupied with the act of hunting until finally he succeeds. "His mental state in the aftermath of killing his first pig, another important event in the boy's decline into savage behaviours"(Babb,17)

His mind was crowded with memories; memories of the knowledge that had come to them when they closed in on the struggling pig, knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long satisfying drink. (LOF,p.88)

Jack rejoices in the killing and is unable to think

about anything else because his mind is "crowded with memories" of the hunt. "Golding explicitly connects Jack's exhilaration with the feelings of power superiority he experienced in killing the pig" (sparknotes.com). Jack's excitement stems not from pride at having found food and helped the group, but from having "outwitted" another creature and "imposed" his will upon it. Earlier, Jack claims that hunting is important to provide meat for the group; now, it becomes clear that Jack's obsession with hunting is due to the satisfaction it provides his primal instincts and has nothing to do with contributing to the group's welfare.

When the hunters return, chanting in triumph after having killed a pig, Ralph, at odds with the torrent of enthusiasm, states that the signal fire was out when there was a ship passing by. Eventually, Jack realizes the futility of hunting against the possibility of rescue. Unable to face the barrage of supporting comments from Piggy, he punches Piggy, breaking one side of his spectacles. Ralph speaks:

"You let the fire out".

"There was a ship."

"They might have seen us. We might have gone home ____".....

This was so bitter for Piggy.... He began to cry out, shrilly:

"You and your blood, Jack Merridew! You and your hunting!

We might have gone home ____"

[Jack] took a step, and able at last to hit someone, stuck his fist into Piggy's stomach.

Ralph made a step forward and Jack smacked Piggy's head.

Piggy's glasses flew off and tinkled on the rocks.

"My specs!", (LOF, p.88-89)

The fire which must be kept burning, presents in the novel a duty to be done not for any immediate end but because it offers some hope of ultimate salvation. As Ralph says,

"The fire is the most important thing on the island. How can we ever be rescued except by luck, if we don't keep a fire going? Is a fire too much for us to make?"

He flung out an arm.

"Look at us! How many are we? And yet we can't keep a fire going to make a smoke. Don't you understand? Can't you see we ought to - ought to die before we let the fire out?" (LOF,p.101)

Jack's reaction is very influential and lets violence escalate as we witness earlier the beginning of the cruelty of Roger, one of the eldest boys, towards the youngest ones or the "littluns" - an important early step in the group's decline into savagery. At this point of the events, the boys try to build their civilization as the civilized instinct still dominates the savage instinct. The cracks are beginning to show, however, particularly in the willingness of some of the older boys to use physical force and violence to give themselves a sense of superiority over the young ones:

Roger gathered a handful of stones and began to throw them.

Yet there was a space round Henry, perhaps six yards in diameter,

into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins. (LOF,p.78)

The above quotation shows us the psychological workings behind the beginnings of that willingness. Roger feels the urge to torment Henry, the little one, by pelting him with stones, but the slight remains of socially imposed standards of behaviour are still too strong for him to give in completely to his savage urges. Roger and most of the other boys misplace their respect for these forces "parents and school and policemen and the law"; violence, torture and murder break out as the savage instinct replaces the instinct for civilization among the group.

With Ralph's harmless nature, good is always the dominated force. This situation is threatened as Jack continues his attempts to take over the conch group; it worsens after confrontation over the dying fire, which he was supposed to look after and the humiliation he was exposed to and Jack declares his rebellion:

"I'm not going to be part of Ralph's lot ____"
"I'm going off by myself. He can catch his own pigs.
Anyone who wants to hunt when I do can come too."
He blundered out of the triangle towards the drop to the white sand.
"Jack!"
Jack turned and looked back at Ralph. For a moment he paused and
cried out, high-pitched, enraged.
"____No!"
He leapt down from the platform and ran along the beach, paying no
heed to the steady fall of his tears; and until he dived into the forest
Ralph watched him.(LOF, p.158)

Jack declares himself the leader of the new tribe of hunters and organizes a hunt and a violent, ritual slaughter of a sow to solemnize the occasion. "The hunters then decapitate the sow and place its head on a sharpened stake in the jungle as offering to the beast [which all of the other boys believe exists in the island and pre-occupies them with its presence]" (aresearchguide.com).

One of the most important and most obvious element in *Lord of the Flies* is the object that gives the novel its name, the pig's head. Golding's description of the slaughtered animal's head on a spear is very graphic and even frightening. The pig's head is depicted as "dim-eyed, grinning faintly, blood blackening between the teeth," and the "obscene thing" is covered with a "black blob of flies" that "tickled under his nostrils" (LOF. PP, 137, 138). As a result of this detailed, striking image, the reader becomes aware of the great evil and darkness represented by the *Lord of the Flies*, and when Simon begins to converse with the seemingly inanimate, devil-like object, the source of that wickedness is revealed later, encountering the bloody, fly-covered head, Simon then undergoes a

peculiar experience, presumably a hallucination, in which he sees the pig head, swarming with scavenging flies, as the "Lord of the Flies," and believes that it is talking to him, identifying itself as the real "Beast". Another of the most important symbols used to present the theme of the novel is the beast. In the imaginations of many of the boys, the beast is a tangible source of evil on the island. However, in reality, it represents the evil naturally present within everyone, which is causing life on the island to deteriorate. It tells Simon the truth about itself -that the boys themselves "created" the beast, and that the *real* beast was inside him and inside them all. The voice which he imagines "as belonging to the Lord of the Flies, says that Simon will never escape him, for he exists within all men" (novelguide.com).

"You are a silly little boy," said the Lord of the Flies.
"What are you doing out there all alone? Aren't you afraid of me?"
Simon shook.
"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!"
said the head.....
I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go?
Simon found he was looking into a vast mouth. There was blackness within, a blackness that spread
"____Or else," said the Lord of the Flies, "we shall do you. See? Jack and Roger and Maurice and Robert and Bill and Piggy and Ralph. Do you. See?"
Simon was inside the mouth. He fell down and lost consciousness.
(LOF,pp.177-178)

Jack expertly uses the beast to manipulate the other boys by establishing the beast as "his tribe's common enemy, common idol, and common system of beliefs all in one. Jack invokes different aspects of the beast depending on which effects he wants to achieve. He uses the boys' fear of the beast to justify his iron-fisted control of the group and the violence he perpetrates" (lordoftheflies.org). He sets up the beast as a sort of idol in order to fuel the boys' bloodlust and establish a cult-like view towards the hunt. The skull becomes a kind of religious totem with extra-ordinary psychological power, driving the boys to abandon their desire for civilization and order and give in to their violent and savage impulses.

Ralph encounters Jack and his tribe in their camp which is called "Castle Rock". Both compete for leadership again, one pressing on the value of meat, the other on the importance of the shelters. While they keep arguing, it starts raining and Jack suggests that the boys perform their dance. At first Roger plays the pig, then amid the rising anxiety and chanting he rejoins the hunters, leaving the centre empty. In the climax of chanting, dancing, thunder and lightning, Simon emerges from the undergrowth with the news of the dead man (the parachutist) he finds on the hill. The man had been mistaken for the beast, and Simon is the only one of the group to recognise that it is a cadaver rather than a sleeping mon-

ster. He eventually arrives at the peak of a tribal ritual at Jack's tribe, pursued by the ravenous flies, and tries to explain the truth about the beast and the dead man on the mountain. However, Jack's tribe, raging with bloodlust from their first kill, ignore his words and use him as the pig - the victim of their dance - attack him, believing him to be the beast in the shadows, and in the frenzy he is killed:

Now out of the terror rose another desire, thick, urgent, blind.
 "Kill the beast! Gut his throat! Spill his blood!"
 Simon was crying out something about a dead man on a hill.
 "Kill the beast! Gut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!"
 The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face.
 It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body on the hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws. (LOF, pp.188)

Ralph, who took part in the murder along with Piggy, though both indirectly, feels intense remorse and have great difficulty accepting the fact that they have murdered Simon: "It was an accident," said Piggy suddenly, "that's what it was. An accident" (LOF, p.193). Ralph behaves and acts according to mere guiding principles, but this behaviour and these guidelines seem "learned than innate. Ralph seems to have darker instinctual urges beneath: like the other boys, he gets swept up by bloodlust during the hunt and the dance afterwards" (sparknotes.com).

Jack delivers instructions about the forthcoming hunt and the defence of Castle Rock. The muted suggestion that they killed Simon is emphatically denied by Jack. Their fire has gone out, so he plans to visit the other group with Maurice and Roger. Jack's hunters attack Ralph and Piggy and their new, followers and steal Piggy's glasses in the process:

Far off the bow stave of beach, three figures trotted towards the Castle Rock. The chief led them, trotting steadily, exulting in his achievement. He was a chief now in truth; and he made stabbing motions with his spear.
 From his left hand dangled Piggy's broken glasses. (LOF, p.207)

There is no fire in the other camp, Piggy's glasses are stolen and it is now imperative to start a fire; Ralph decides to confront Jack, Piggy accompanies him and insists on carrying the conch as a sign of discipline. Ralph lists Jack's crimes - letting the fire go out, killing Simon, and now theft. He suggests that they approach Jack as civilized human beings, not as savages and explain the necessity and seriousness of being rescued. Approaching the Castle Rock, Ralph charges Jack with the theft of glasses. "Indignant at the accusation, Jack stabs at Ralph who retaliates with righteous anger. The fight is halted with the boys trying to outface each other" (Foster, 43).

Whether from the guilt and shame of their previous

actions or recognition of Piggy as an enemy, the hunters are outraged. one of the most memorable symbols that is used to show the violence and darkness which comes to rule life on the island is the rock, which Roger releases to kill Piggy. As an archetype in literature, a rock can symbolize strength and power, and since this rock is red, it also represents violence. It is Roger who feels strong and powerful as he stands on the ledge above Piggy. "High overhead, Roger, with a sense of delirium abandonment, leaned all his weight on the lever" (LOF, p.180). When the rock lands below, it not only strikes Piggy, but it also shatters the conch shell. Up to that point, Piggy and the conch had been two of the few representations of civilization and common sense on the island. "Roger leans on the lever under the rock, tipping it down onto the approach path. Ralph sidesteps it but Piggy and the conch are struck." (Foster, 47). The conch is shattered and Piggy is knocked off the cliff and dies on a square rock forty feet below in the sea:

His head opened and stuff came out and turned red.
 Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone. (LOF, pp.222-223)

Ralph is shocked but Jack, unrepentant, throws a spear which hits Ralph painfully in the chest, other spears follow and Ralph barely manages to escape the torrent of spears:

Suddenly Jack bounded out from the tribe and began screaming wildly.
 "See? See? That's what you'll get! I meant that! There isn't a tribe for you anymore! The conch is gone__"
 "I'm Chief!"
 Viciously, with full intention, he hurled his spear at Ralph.....
 Another spear, a bent one that would not fly straight, went past his face and one fell from on high where Roger was.
 Ralph turned and ran and was hidden by the forest. (LOF, p.223)

The following morning, in the final sequence of the book, Jack and Roger lead their tribe on a manhunt for Ralph, intending to kill him. Ralph has become an outcast, partly because "he had some sense". He is alone now that Piggy and Simon dead and Sam and Eric- his tribe's members- have been forced to change sides.

Ralph hides for the rest of the night and the following day, while the other boys hunt him like an animal. Jack, now nearly complete in his demonic role as the ultimate savage, sets the entire island ablaze. He has the other boys ignite the forest in order to smoke Ralph out of his hiding place. Ralph stays in the forest, where he discovers and destroys the sow's head, but eventually, he is forced out onto the beach, where he knows the other boys will soon arrive to kill him:

they were all running, all crying out madly. He could hear

them crashing. In the undergrowth and on the left was the hot, bright thunder of the fire. He forgot his wounds, his hunger and thirst, and became fear; hopeless fear on flying feet, rushing through the forest towards the open beach. He stumbled over a root and the cry that pursued him rose even higher. He saw a shelter burst into flames and the fire flapped at his right shoulder and there was the glitter of water. Then he was down, rolling over and over in the warm sand, crouching with arms up to ward off, trying to cry for mercy. (LOF, pp.245-246)

Ralph collapses in exhaustion, but when he looks up, he sees a British naval officer standing over him. However, the fire started by Jack is so large that it has attracted the attention of a nearby warship. The navy officer lands on the island near where Ralph is lying, and his sudden appearance brings the children's fighting to an abrupt halt. Upon learning of the boys' activities, the officer remarks that he would have expected better from British boys, believing them only to be playing a game, unaware of the two murders that have taken place and the imminent occurrence of a third. "Amazed at the spectacle of this group of bloodthirsty, savage children, the officer asks Ralph to explain. Ralph is overwhelmed by the knowledge that he is safe but thinking about what has happened on the island he begins to weep" (Muller, 1203). Ralph cries, in mourning for his friend Piggy, his own loss of innocence, and his newfound awareness of the darkness of human nature. The other boys begin to sob as well. The officer turns his back so that the boys may regain their composure.

CONCLUSION

Lord of the Flies is an allegorical novel in that it contains characters and objects that directly represent the novel's themes and ideas. Golding's central point in the novel is that a conflict between the impulse toward civilization and the impulse toward savagery rages within each human individual, regardless a child or an adult.

Golding describes the breakdown of civilization as resulting from nothing more complex than the inherent evil of man: "So the boys try to construct a civilization on the island; but it breaks down in blood and terror because the boys are suffering from the terrible disease of being human" (Tiger, 85).

We are given a general impression of an island full of boys of various ages from six to twelve. We do not know how many there are, what most of them are doing, or how fast time is passing. They are the common mass on which the leaders work, evasive and ideal when the shelters are to be built, neglectful when the fire is to be watched, frightened of the dark and of their leaders, but docile and well disciplined when their faces are painted and they are members of the tribe of Jack's hunters.

The novel's setting presents two more symbols that assist in showing the decline of civility on the island. A

majority of the island is taken up by the jungle, which is used by many authors as an archetype to represent death and decay. In fact, since the jungle is the lair of the beast, it, too, symbolizes the darkness naturally present within humans that is capable of ruling their lives. At one end of the island, where the plane carrying the boys most likely crashed, there is a "long scar smashed into the jungle" (LOF, p.1). While Golding does not include a large amount of description about the scar, the image of "broken trunks" with "jagged edges" is sufficient to give the reader an idea of the destruction caused to the island (LOF, p.1, 2). Symbolically, this scar represents the destruction that man is naturally capable of causing and can be related to the harm the boys ultimately cause to one another, including the deaths of three boys, before they are rescued.

The evil within the boys has more effect on their existence as they spend more time on the island, isolated from the rest of society, and this decline is portrayed by Piggy's specs. Throughout the novel, Piggy represents the civilization and the rules from which the boys have been separated, and interestingly, as Piggy loses his ability to see, so do the other boys lose their vision of that civilization.

In the end though Ralph is capable of leadership, one can see that he shares the hidden instinct toward Savagery and violence that Jack and his tribe embrace. It is Simon who recognizes the truth that stands at the core of the novel - that the beast does not exist in tangible form on the island but rather exists as an impulse toward evil within each individual.

As the boys gradually get over their awe at the sight of the fire, their taste for killing intensifies. After the first kill, Jack "twitched" when retelling of his exploit. But by the fourth hunt (the killing of the sow), the boys feel "no twitched of conscience, no element of pretence" (LOF, p.120). The fifth hunt, during which Simon is killed, moves us "even closer to the unbridled impulses of the human heart." (Golding, 88). And the sixth hunt (which is for Ralph's head) represents the final depravity of a fallen man: cannibalism.

The rescue is not a moment of total joy, for Ralph realizes that, although he is saved from death on the island, he will never be the same. He has lost his innocence and learned about the evil that lurks within all human beings. "Here Golding explicitly connects the sources of Ralph's despair to two of the main themes of the novel: the end of innocence and the 'darkness of man's heart,'" (Amazon.com) the presence of savage instincts lurking within all human beings, even at the height of civilization.

REFERENCES

- Foster, S.W. (2002). *Lord of the Flies*. York Press. 322 Old Brompton Road: London SW5 9JH.
- Golding, William.(1996). *Lord of the Flies*. Faber and Faber Limited: London, reset .
- Golding, William. (1997). "Lord of the Flies as Fable." *Readings on Lord of the Flies*. Ed. Bruno Leone. San Diego: Green Haven Press (pp,88-97).
- Howard S. Babb. (1970) 17. *The Novels of William Golding* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press,
- Muller, William R. (October 2, 1963). An Old Story Well Told. *Christian Century*, 80, 1203-06.
- Tiger, Virginia M.(1974). *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery*. London: Calder & Boyars.
- <http://lordoftheflies.org/analy.htm>
- www.sparknotes.com Lord of the flies.
- [www.sparknotes.com Lord of the Flies Chapter Summary. html.](http://www.sparknotes.com/Lord%20of%20the%20Flies/Chapter%20Summary.html)
- [www.sparknotes.com/lit/flies/summary.html.](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/flies/summary.html)
- [www.william-golding.com uk/F__teacher. pdf.](http://www.william-golding.com/uk/F__teacher.pdf)
- [www.novelguide.com/lord of the flies](http://www.novelguide.com/lord%20of%20the%20flies)
- www.aresearchguide.com/lord.html
- [www.amazon.com/Lord-Flies-William-Goldingdp.](http://www.amazon.com/Lord-Flies-William-Goldingdp)